Identity, Language and Culture: Six Frames

Abstract

Asking a group of educational researchers to conceptualise the relationship between identity, language and culture, and then to collaboratively prepare a one-page theme statement that represents the views of the group, is guaranteed to stir up some stimulating and challenging discussions. In 2013, a community of practice called the Identity, Language and Culture theme group was established to increase research dialogue and interaction between researchers and research students at Charles Darwin University. This paper reviews aspects of individual theme statements and identifies dominant discourses that can be used as research 'frames'. The paper examines key areas of difference, contention and overlap; discusses the challenges and benefits of researchers' contributions to theme discussions; and identifies six discourses or 'frames', on the ILC theme. These frames are evaluated in the light of their usefulness as 'entry point discourses' for research students, enabling them to gain access to a research community. The frames can also be used to identify and challenge the traditional boundaries established by discursive and pedagogical traditions in the humanities and social sciences that construct and maintain specialised and ostensibly discrete domains of knowledge.

Keywords: Identity, language, culture, research culture, research supervision

Introduction

In current higher education research contexts, there is an increasing need to break away from individualistic research approaches and engage, instead, in more collaborative approaches. The development of the Identity, Language and Culture research theme group within the International Graduate Centre of Education at Charles Darwin University aims to promote and facilitate collaborative research projects across various schools and Faculties. Identifying with the ILC theme is also intended to more effectively connect research higher degree students with a research community and broaden researchers' understanding of the fields in which they work.

Asking individual researchers to articulate their perspectives and research interests as they intersect with the ILC theme through the individual writing and sharing of a one page theme statement was a means of signalling research expertise in the field, and facilitating collaborative projects with research students. The difficulty of the task, however, was immediately apparent to all involved as the one page statements were more significant in terms of what was left unsaid. It was impossible for group members to articulate, accommodate and coordinate, in a one page statement, the multiple relationships and perspectives that came to mind when considering the nature of such problematic

concepts as identity, language and culture and the implications of such understandings for the field of educational research. Nevertheless, the difficulty of the task raised important questions regarding the relationships between the different perspectives recorded on paper, and the various domains of knowledge the represented by those perspectives.

Educational research that engages with issues of identity, language and culture is crucial for understanding the relationship between teaching and learning; how and why particular students engage with particular fields of knowledge; who succeeds in attaining their learning goals, who doesn't succeed, and why. Research approaches to understanding identity, language and culture on a theoretical level are also informed by, and impact on, the pragmatic and process oriented aspects of institutionally situated, pedagogical practices. In the higher degree context of research supervision, themes of identity, language and culture are deeply implicated in the way researchers work together. These issues are particularly relevant now in view of the increasingly global nature of educational research and the increasing number of international students entering the Australian higher education system.

Research by Deem and Brehony (2000) indicate that international and part-time students experience greater difficulty in accessing peer and academic cultures. With the number of international students studying at Australian universities and professional mobility on the increase, all research students, whether international or Australian, bring with them a variety of complex cultural identities and academic practices (Hawkins & Bransgove, 1998) that influence their experiences of supervision as a form of research partnership:

> Academic research cultures include disciplinary or interdisciplinary ideas and values, particular kinds of expert knowledge and knowledge production, cultural practices and narratives (for instance how research is done, and how peer review is exercised), departmental sociability, other internal and external intellectual networks and learned societies.' (Deem & Brehony, 2000, p. 158).

Not only is education a complex amalgamation of knowledge cultures, but beyond the academic cultures of subject domains, the contradictory culture of Western pedagogies and policies simultaneously values student autonomy and creativity while at the same time acceding to the rhetoric of surveillance and regulation of standards and traditional assessment practices. For many students, therefore, the research supervisor represents a means by which they can negotiate an authorised place within a research community as the supervisor represents an entry point into the field of study and provides access to the disciplinary culture (Deem & Brehony, 2000). Through dialogue, knowledge is co-constructed, novice researchers are socialised into the disciplinary language and culture of the field (Dysthe, 2002) and connected with a discourse community, and the theoretical boundaries and academic cultures that define the field are re-affirmed:

> The dialogic co-construction of knowledge is a particularly pertinent, though sometimes underrated, element in academic knowledge production. At universities, it takes place in culturally defined spaces, and the concepts of discourse communities and disciplines are attempts to define such cultures. (Dysthe, 2002, p. 501)

Lave and Wenger (1991) claim that working with a community of like-minded practitioner researchers can enhance the learning experience. Research supervisors and research students, however, can have very different research agendas and these are not always made transparent to others. In the case of co-supervision, or cross-disciplinary research, where different theoretical paradigms require different cannons of validation, it is important for research supervisors to work

together in such a way as to avoid undermining the heterogeneity (Dysthe, 2002) that characterises the field and to empower the research student to explore the research landscape. Stahl et al. argue that research across contesting theoretical paradigms represent an opportunity to develop 'a shared supervision culture … by raising awareness of colleagues' work. Seddon et al. (2013) see the contested arena as space for capacity building. They argue that ' … the ecological complexity of education, knowledge and practice opens up ways of strategizing around the formation of boundaries.' (2013, p. 448). Personal empowerment to challenge and reshape knowledge of the field thus supports innovation and professional empowerment.

Cockburn-Wootten, Henderson & Rix (2005) recommend that tensions in group dynamics can act as a 'source of creative energy' and opportunities for staff to learn (p. 77). When practical, academic and epistemological expectations remain unarticulated, however, research dialogues can create a conceptual maze with the result that the student researcher changes tack in a reactive fashion instead of proactively mapping and co-constructing the research landscape with and for their supervisors. Supervisors in different disciplines do things differently: they hold different values and beliefs, they prefer specific methods, research approaches, theoretical frameworks and epistemologies and pursue different research agendas (Nisselle & Duncan, 2008). Researchers in the ILC theme group are no different in this regard. Student researchers on the other hand are still developing their understanding of the field; searching for manageable boundaries; aiming for deadlines, and sometimes hoping that the knowledge of the field of research their supervisor shares with them represents the entire metaphorical iceberg rather than just the tip.

One aim, therefore, in identifying the different perspectives on the ILC theme is to provide research students with some explicit frames of reference, within which they can evaluate and map the issues raised by supervisors. These frames are not linked to individual theme group members' statements, but represent broader and more abstract categories that serve as entry points into conversations in the theme area of ILC.

Method

The ILC theme group began by meeting to share their understandings of the requirements of the theme statements. Diverse perspectives on the relationship between individual research projects and how those projects intersect with the theme were discussed. Although there was some uncertainty and, at times, clear disagreement with regard to the purpose of the theme statements, each ILC theme group member developed and shared a one-page theme statement representing their contributions to the ILC research theme in terms of their research backgrounds and interests. The length of theme statements ranged from two-thirds of a page to three pages. Analysis of theme statements was undertaken using a grounded theory process, which began with intensive, line by line coding. Where phrases did not stand on their own, due to the use of adversative conjunctions such as 'however', 'but', and 'although', the entire sentence was recorded as an initial code to maintain integrity of meaning. Codes were constructed to represent a high frequency of related statements (initial codes). Axial coding was used to draw related codes together to develop the dimensions of a broader category. The six categories constructed as a result of the coding process were then renamed as six research perspectives. However, as a group member objected to the use of the term 'perspectives', the six categories are referred to as 'six frames' in this paper.

The use of initial coding to record and construct patterns of dominant codes was undertaken concurrently with axial coding in order to ensure the development of a narrative that constructs and explains multiple dimensions of a category, rather than being 'made to fit' codes. Consequently, each

category (frame) allows for the inclusion of both tensions and agreements between codes on similar ideas. The six frames constructed as a result of this analytical method are referred to as epistemological, cultural, semantic, pedagogical, space-time (geographical/historical) and political frames. The following sections explain how each frame acts as a window into, or boundary marker for, discussions on the ILC theme. A few examples of the initial codes that constitute various dimensions of each frame are presented in italics. Their significance in terms of exploring aspects and interrelatedness of the frames is discussed in the following section and their possible areas of contention and agreement are explored.

Epistemological frame

The epistemological frame asks the question, 'How do we know?' In the statement below, cultural knowledge is embodied and, therefore, interpreted differently depending on the race, ethnicity, gender, age and abilities or disabilities. Consequently, the corporeality or life worlds of researchers and the researched are implicated in the construction of knowledge:

> *My own preference is to think of culture in terms of Bourdieu's notion of habitus, a 'system of disposition' formed as 'embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 56).*

Furthermore, traditions of knowing are only meaningful as they are interpreted and enacted in a moment in time. If knowing and being are constantly enacted and 'in process' then the following statement becomes problematic and could lead to an understanding that identities and personalities are separate and the term 'multiple' represents clearly bounded categories as objects of research:

> *We have multiple identities and personalities.*

This stance raises interesting questions about the implications of different ways of being for the way we know the world. As this statement was left undeveloped it could suggest that identity is bounded by the individual mind. Due to the required brevity of the theme statements, however, the difference between identity, disposition and personality remains undefined. This leaves open the possibility of a research student who might not yet be aware of the ways in which discursive frameworks redefine and appropriate these terms, drawing from research literature incommensurate with Bourdieu's (1987, p. 302) discussion about personality, which is not presented as a single, fixed or innate characteristic of an individual (Truc, 2011) . The meaning of the two statements above are further modified and textualised by the following statement that creates a more linear and structured understanding of the relationship between identity, language, culture and epistemologies:

> *The stories we were told are interwoven throughout our lives, telling us who we are, what we may become, and the changes we experience each day.*

This statement, suggests that how we know about ourselves and the world around us is through the narratives that record and envision our place in social and natural domains. Narratives are communicated through language and develop their meaning over time. Narratives engage with the ontological issue of the indefinite nature of human being by calling into being alternative ways of being and alternative means of agency and action in a complex and sometimes hostile world. They construct possibilities for social design and opening up the potential of the human subject.

Alternatively, a narrative approach to understanding identity, language and culture, can have the effect of creating 'grammar chains' (Luke, 2003) that regulate patterns of action and interaction, interpretation and representation:

> *The impact of valuing a national language over local languages or dialects … can serve to maintain dominant cultural values at the expense of a range of different ways of being and knowing.*

This reading of narrative as power and discourse (Luke, 2003) is not necessarily incommensurate with the previous statement. Instead it focuses on the pedagogical and political implications of narratives as ways of knowing, and promotes reflection on how researchers choose to take up or reject particular narratives. The dimensions of the epistemological frame, therefore, encompasses ways of knowing as presented along a spectrum of internal and external constructions; individual and socio-cultural events; as controlling and transformative processes.

Cultural frame

The cultural frame focuses on various approaches to understanding the relationship between the individual and society. Here we see an overlapping of frames, where initial codes are purposefully presented in multiple frames, making the point that these frames are interdependent: Threads from each category are interwoven to create complex patterns of relationships. For example, the statement below not only refers back to the issue of how we know, but also raises the questions of what learning is, and how learning is defined. The latter question on learning establishes a relationship between the cultural frame and the pedagogical frame, which is discussed later in the paper.

In the cultural frame, instead of arguing a position on the statement below, it is important to first consider in which epistemic and pedagogical cultures the following statement can be considered to be both true and false.

> *It is possible to learn through observation alone*

In the fields of cognitive and educational neuroscience and in some areas of educational psychology, signal processing in neural circuits represents learning as an automatic response to external stimuli. In this context, the focus on cognitive processes conceptualises learning as cognitive response. This position fits with the following statement, which focuses on language as a particular mode of stimulus and response:

> *English teachers in Australia may have as much or more shared background with English teachers in Japan as they have with Australian truck drivers, and this shared background is crucial for communication.*

Language acts as a cultural tool that foregrounds the significance of shared knowledge, whether that be knowledge of a language or a particular cultural discourse, such as truck driving. The significance of social connections and language practices raises awareness of the fluid nature of group boundaries and creates a complex context for understanding experiences of culture and belonging.

The ambiguous nature of culture is further illustrated by the following two statements. The word 'dispositions' in the first statement establishes a connection to the earlier reference to Bourdieu, and in the second statement identity, language and culture are not measureable, static, objectifiable phenomena that can be observed and understood as an outsider, but are an effect of participation in a culture:

The concept of culture does not refer merely to some sort of ethnic culture, perhaps with imagined consistency and stability, but more generally to the dispositions shared by any community.

Participation in multiple communities helps build our various identities whether we see them as individual or collective or both

The reciprocal relationship between the individual and the collective suggests that the observations and interpretations by researchers are inevitably tinged with epistemic biases, appropriated meanings and unconscious responses to social markers such as gender, race, age or dis/ability. Shared language backgrounds do not guarantee a flow of communication, a social connection, or sense of belonging. Irrespective of the mode and means of communication, an individual who is unfamiliar with the field under discussion will feel like an outsider and will either accept that they are unable to participate effectively or will change the topic in order to participate.

The following statement acknowledges that multiple social relations have a cumulative effect on one's sense of identity (Boser, 2006):

Cultural differences may include … different patterns of thinking, feeling and acting.

Culture is thus both internalised by the individual, and enacted socially. The extent to which research focuses on the autonomy and agency of the individual, signifies the key dimension of this frame. Where the individual is seen as autonomous, a normative position, where culture is defined by dominant patterns of practice and behaviour, can result in research that focuses on divergent behaviours. The pedagogical implication of this focus can be the tendency to monitor for, and possibly stigmatise individuals who deviate from normalised patterns of behaviour.

Semantic frame

The semantic frame relates to the complexity of meaning making and representation. It connects authorial intent with culturally situated communicative forms and purposes. It is not a reference to semantics as the field of study, although reference to Lien's definition of frame semantics is useful here:

> Frame semantics is based on the assumption that one cannot fully understand and do full justice to word meanings solely in terms of such inter-item structural relationship; rather they should be reckoned with in terms of the conceptual frames or schemas. In such a framework word meanings can be teased out with reference to the background structure of the world including our experience, belief, imagination, practice and so on. (Lien, 2000).

The following statements, for example, illustrate the subtle nuances of the word 'communication' as it is used within different 'schemas':

Communication is not actually required for learning

Communication (or semiotic systems) do not stand on their own, but rather are embedded within culture (to use a popular but problematic term)

The multi-literacies movement has stressed the importance of mastering multiple modes of communication [and] … negotiating multiple varieties of language

In 1953, Cartier and Hanvood noted various uses and definitions of the word ‘communication’, including an explicit, descriptive definition that explains what communication looks or sounds like; normative definitions that explain what communication ought to be or mean; and intuitive definitions that draw from tacit ‘schema’. These uses and dimensions make up the semantic frame. .

Pedagogical frame

Initial codes relevant to the pedagogical frame were identified by references to teaching, learning and pedagogy. The statement below notes the significance of language as the medium for instruction:

> *An exploration of language as the medium for instruction promotes an awareness of language as being the conduit for all teaching and learning events … irrespective of the subject matter*

The multiliteracies movement (Cope & Kalantzis 2000) has stressed the importance of mastering multiple modes of communication [and] the ability to negotiate multiple varieties of language:

Formal education has long focused on spoken and perhaps especially written language as particularly important means of communication

I believe culture can be taught through and beyond language with the educators and learners’ input from their identity.

The following statement refers to the inherently interdisciplinary nature of teacher education.

> *I see education itself as inherently interdisciplinary: Teachers use techniques and philosophies of education, but they also draw on the knowledge and practices of the disciplines that they are teaching*

Another example considers the relationship between cultural change and pedagogy:

> *The relocation of individuals from rural areas to towns, from towns to cities, from one country to another country or one organisation to another, means that the global subject will need to develop skills that enable them to successfully negotiate pedagogical and cultural shifts*

Together the shifting interpretations and understandings of the language used to teach through, the cultures of various domains of knowledge and the uniqueness of individual schema, represent a complex, extended and ‘messy’ web of cultural expectations that require flexible pedagogical theories and a multiplicity of teaching and learning strategies. The dimensions of the pedagogical frame, therefore, include a focus on the significance of language (or pedagogical discourses), a focus on domain specific knowledge and practices (often referred to as pedagogical content knowledge), and a focus on the implication of cultural context for teachers and learners.

Space/Time frame (physically situated)

The impact of history and geography on the subject’s perception and understanding of the self and the world are acknowledge across a number of theme statements. The space/time frame, therefore, points to the impact of history and location on language, identity and culture. Haraway’s (1991) focus on situated knowledge recognises that individuals always act from a position of knowing something in particular and being somewhere in particular. Consequently, she advocates ‘politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the

condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims' (p. 195). This focus is evident in the first two statements below, which identify specific cultures and regions in which explorations of identity, language and culture take place:

> *… studies with Iwaidja speaking people of North-West Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory to current research into the use of culture and language in early mathematics teaching in the Highland s of Papua New Guinea*

> *My contribution to ILC understands the effect of diaspora in Asia and Pacific region. This diasporic change occurred when living in three different worlds which consist of the Cook Islands, Hawaii, New Zealand and now Australia*

Understandings of lived experience, the values of a language and culture, are informed by the values that circulate at a particular place and time. Furthermore, the focus on a particular place and time can be seen as an effect of located histories:

> *This [narrative] provides us with a sense of history, meaning, continuity support in what we want to achieve and offers us a lasting connection to our cultural identity and heritage*

> *… in an inclusive learning environment, questions regarding the ways in which students' histories are made present are not only relevant, they are the building blocks of those environments.*

Similarly, research communities are heterogeneous, 'shaped by shifting networks across many sites, changing over time, and influenced by personal, interpersonal, institutional, and historical configurations.' (Dysthe, 2002, p. 502)

Political frame

The political frame focusses on power as a '… network of social boundaries that delimit fields of possible action." (Hayward, 1998, pp 11-12). The dimensions of this category are represented by the extent to which a statement articulates an explicit, critical stance. The two statements below, for example, refer to the oppressive effects of dominant cultural practices on marginalised groups:

> *The impact of valuing a national language over local language or dialects … can serve to maintain dominant cultural values at the expense of a range of different ways of being and knowing.*

> *If one language of many used in a region is mandated to be the medium of instruction, the implications for those teachers/students who don't have the necessary language competencies can be one of disempowerment*

Not all political frames are critical. The following statements acknowledge that pedagogical, political and cultural practices that impact on the experience of teaching and learning, but there is no clear reference to issues of equity or justice. In this context, power relates is a pragmatic and productive force that represents individual or group agency.

> *The language of instruction can also have a significant impact on pedagogical outcomes and on the construction of teaching and learning identities.*

A focus on classroom discourse is important for analysing and evaluating teaching and learning relationships.

Educationally, this includes exploring questions such as what and how language is used for mathematics education, ranging from choices made at a policy level to deep investigations of how mathematical meaning is made and communicated.

… cultural boundaries can be maintained through deliberate resistance to assimilation although such boundaries are likely to be eroded from within over time as a result of inter-generational processes.

The contesting political dimensions of this frame extend to the political nature of research cultures and practice. One aspect that is much less frequently discussed by researchers is the social side of research, which includes, for example, power structures in a research department, between qualitative and quantitative methodologies, or positivist and postpositivist philosophical frameworks that can influence a research student's decision to work with a particular research supervisor or subscribe to a particular theory or methodology. (Stahl et al., 2008).

Summary

This paper has identified six frames for understanding the implications of different research paradigms and research approaches as they relate to identity, language and culture. Research conversations in the areas of identity, language and culture are regularly seasoned with epistemological cues pointing to the researcher's values and assumptions. However, researchers do not always reflect on the processes of their own thinking or acknowledge the ways in which their thinking reshapes the discipline (Tremmel, 2006). Without conscious reflection, a routine of epistemic practices can lead to entrenched habit and an unexamined position of epistemic purity. This is the antithesis of the concept of inquiry: hence the generative potential of working with a diverse group of researchers. Harnessing the energy provoked by challenges to a comfortable research position and carefully framing and relating research dialogues across a number of categories can be helpful in terms of identifying relevant literature and establishing a coherent and cohesive approach to inquiry. Qualitative research in the fields of identity, language and culture is complex and problematic and often challenge the notions of 'quality research' due to the need to reflect on the assumptions underlying the research methodology (Zuber-Skerritt & Fletcher, 2007):

> We do not, as a rule, think very much about the processes of our own thinking and how those processes shape our discipline. The closest we usually get to such metacognition is engaging in what we call :reflection: or :reflective practice,," but even then the emphasis is usually on *what* we think, and not *how*. (Tremmel, 2006, p. 11)

Educational researchers must reach across the barriers that define their specialisation to seek more comprehensive, transformational changes to their discipline that can only occur if they are sufficiently open to the challenge of contestation by other researchers. Baldwin (2008) notes that inquiry is a social process, and explains that innovation occurs as part of 'an incremental and developmental process, rather than a new event.' (p. 335). Accordingly, good research should not be defined by a set of normative standards associated with disciplinary cultures; rather, it should be evaluated in terms of intellectual development and innovation. Cross disciplinary research projects can facilitate innovation by reshaping the boundaries that limit the exploration of different ways of thinking.

Acknowledgements

Special acknowledgement goes to Dr Paul Black and Dr Cris Edmonds-Wathen who contributed theme statements as well as rich and challenging theoretical insights that extended the boundaries of the ILC theme.

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